



Client

Goodway Group

Industry

Digital advertising

Topics

Improve efficiency and productivity for a remote team

Challenge

Resolve a fear of providing feedback

Solution

Multi-year rollout to train remote staff how to improve teams interactions and better productivity

Result

Improved cross-functional collaboration and trust

Decline in anonymous negative feedback

ENHANCING EFFICIENCY & PRODUCTIVITY OF REMOTE TEAMS

This digital advertising agency represents an extreme example of a remote working culture. Of its 350 full-time staff, only three work in the company's central office in Philadelphia. Everyone else works from home. That's a big change from Goodway Group's start back in 1929 as a one-man printing company.



Challenge

After Goodway's workforce began working remotely in 2010, the company started experiencing an unexpected challenge: employees, working in project teams of five to 15 people to develop digital ad campaigns for clients, became more reluctant to give direct feedback to each other.



Whenever an employee had a concern, they'd raise the issue with their manager rather than speaking directly to the team member. This created a "horseshoe process" in which team issues were first elevated to managers, then brought back down to their direct reports to be addressed.



This process quickly became complicated by the fact that Goodway's project teams are cross-functional, with employees from a range of departments such as sales, media, and client operations. As a result, they often had different managers, which meant that managers from various departments were spending a lot of time fielding these complaints and trying to sort out what had happened to solve the problem.



This pattern was further aggravated by Goodway's widespread use of Skype instant messaging and conferencing to compensate for the lack of in-person communication. The technologies left some employees feeling disconnected and reluctant to invite conflict by discussing potentially unpleasant issues, which made it challenging to solve problems as a team.



Solution

In 2017, Goodway decided it needed to improve the quality of its team interactions and help employees have more productive discussions. As part of receiving fierce conversation training, company managers learned to redirect staff when they came to them with team problems. Instead of giving advice or taking responsibility for resolving the issue, managers now know to ask two questions: “Have you gotten to the root of the problem?” and, “What do you think you should do about this?” They also coach the team member on how to speak directly with the person they have an issue with.

To date, 55 Goodway managers have received the conversational training. Because of the success with those managers, Goodway has since rolled out the training to all 350 employees. Now, when issues arise within a team, employees are encouraged to first interrogate reality, asking questions to determine what caused the problem instead of going directly to their managers. They’re also taught to ask questions that provoke learning, guiding them in understanding the other person’s position.

“Now everyone realizes, ‘This conversation is not about blaming each other, but a tool we’re using to solve the problem,’” says Kandi Gongora, Goodway’s VP of People and Organizational Development.

This approach helped one Goodway team that was struggling with a new team member who had an assertive work style. “She talked and moved fast, and would stress the team out,” Gongora recounts. “Because she’d get frustrated when the team asked questions, they stopped asking and started making assumptions.”



The situation seemed unresolvable until one team member, trained in the new way of conversing, approached the team member after a particularly tense meeting. The team member recounted some of the things she had said during the meeting and the impact it had on the team. “The team member had no idea of how the rest of the team felt,” Gongora says. “She took the feedback to heart and let the team know she cared about them and was only pushing so hard because she wanted them to be successful.”



In addition, the team member revealed the stress and pressure she was feeling. This interaction enriched their relationship and helped all the team members better understand each other’s perspectives.



“They were so proud they’d resolved the issue on their own, without involving a manager,” Gongora says.










Results

One of the most telling indications of success comes from the company's anonymous online feedback tool, known as the Suggestion Ox. Since implementing the new approach to conversations, the number of comments that employees submit to management through the platform has dropped from an average of 10 to one comment per month — one of many signs that employees are now giving feedback directly to each other.

The “horseshoe process” has also disappeared, as managers continue to encourage each team member to speak directly with their colleagues when they have feedback to share. Goodway has also begun conducting most meetings by video so employees can have more meaningful conversations. And cross-functional teams are working with more trust, which in turn creates better results for their team, the organization, and their clients.

“The working from home thing is great, but that’s not a reason to work here,” wrote one Goodway employee on a popular job-review website. “I feel more connected with my coworkers through video conferencing and our all-company trips than anywhere I’ve ever worked.”

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